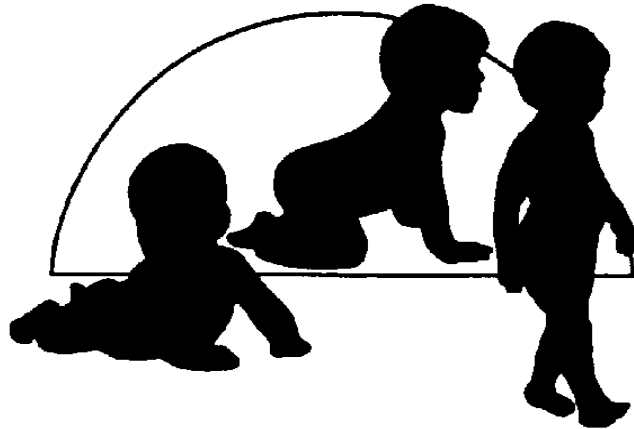


**WASHINGTON STATE**  
**INFANT TODDLER EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM**



**GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTING  
EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES IN  
NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS**

**October 2001**



## INTRODUCTION

The intent of the natural environments requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part C, is to help families as they support and encourage the development of their child. This intent was expressed in the original 1986 law, and its congressional preamble. The term natural environments first appeared in the Federal Register on June 22, 1989 in regulations for the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986 (Public Law 99-457). The term appears in the law for the first time in the IDEA Amendments of 1991 (Public Law 102-119). The reauthorization of IDEA in June of 1997 included the strengthening of language regarding natural environments by requiring that the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) include written justification of the extent, if any, to which the services will not be provided in a natural environment. Washington's Application for Federal Funds was revised to include a natural environment policy and procedures that aligned with the 1997 amendments and went into effect July 1, 1998.

Providing and developing services in natural environments has been a focus of discussion for some time. Due to this, The Council of Exceptional Children, Division For Early Childhood (DEC), revised the DEC Position on Inclusion to emphasize their support for the right of children, regardless of abilities, to participate actively in natural settings within their communities. The full Position on Inclusion is on pages 7. It can also be obtained at the DEC web site at <http://www.dec-sped.org/positions/inclusio.html>

The purpose of Washington's Guidelines for Implementing Early Intervention Services in Natural Environments is to provide guidance to all individuals who comprise the state early intervention system in adapting and modifying services as necessary to meet the natural environments requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part C. The Guidelines emphasize the importance of providing early intervention services as part of the family's daily routine and activities; using the child's natural learning opportunities. Every discussion with families from initial contact and continuing throughout the family's participation in the early intervention system should include this perspective.

The Guidelines for Implementing Early Intervention Services in Natural Environments are intended to be used along with Washington State's Application for Federal Funding in Accordance with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part C, and Accessing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Early Intervention Funding Process. Together, these documents provide guidance for implementing early intervention services that are responsive to the natural environments requirements, and respectful to families. These documents can be obtained from the Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program web site at <http://www.wa.gov/dshs/iteip/iteip.html>.

## WHAT ARE EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES?

### The Federal Regulations and Washington State Definition:

The term *early intervention services*, as it applies to children eligible for services as defined by the early intervention, (Part C) of IDEA means services that are:

- Designed to meet the developmental needs of the child and the needs of the family related to enhancing the child's development;
- Individualized, family centered and selected in collaboration with the parents;
- Provided under public supervision by qualified personnel, in conformity with the individualized family service plan;
- Provided at no cost to families, unless, Federal or State law provides for a system of payments by the family; and
- Provided in natural environments to the maximum extent appropriate to meet the needs of the child. [*US Code of Federal Regulations 303.12 (a) (1), (2), (3), (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (b) and Washington State's Application for Federal Funds, Section III-4*].

## WHAT ARE FEDERAL AND STATE NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS DEFINITIONS?

### The Federal Regulatory and Washington State Definitions:

*Natural environments* mean settings that are natural or normal for the child's age peers who have no disabilities (*US Code of Federal Regulations 303.18*). These services are home, neighborhood, or community settings in which children without disabilities participate (*Washington State's Application for Federal Funds, Section III-12*).

## **CAN AN EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICE BE PROVIDED IN OTHER THAN A NATURAL ENVIRONMENT?**

### The Federal Regulations and Washington State Definitions:

The Individualized Family Service Plan must include a statement of the specific early intervention services necessary to meet the unique needs of the child and the family to achieve identified outcomes including the natural environments in which early intervention services will be provided, and a justification of the extent, if any, to which the services will not be provided in a natural environment. [US Code of Federal Regulations 303.344 (d) (1), (ii) and Washington State's Application for Federal Funds, Section IV-15-21].

The provision of early intervention services for any infant or toddler occurs in a setting other than a natural environment only if/when early intervention cannot be achieved satisfactorily for the infant or toddler in a natural environment [US Code of Federal Regulations 303.167 (c) (1), (2) and Washington State's Application for Federal Funds, Section IV-21].

## **CORNERSTONES RELATED TO SUPPORTING NATURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

- Establish a relationship of trust and respect with families. Support family priorities for their child within their daily life and culture. Encourage family and caregiver involvement throughout early intervention.
- Work with each family individually, carefully learning about their daily routines, concerns, resources and priorities for enhancing their child's development.
- Share with each family the importance of inclusion and the fact that infants and toddlers learn from their family and their everyday environments.
- Support families to access information on an array of formal and informal opportunities for family networking, parent support and education.
- Deliver services using flexible approaches such as blending consultation with delivery of direct services.
- Encourage an understanding of early intervention supports and services that are a part of the daily routines and activities of families.
- Ensure options for and access to a flexible continuum of service settings.
- Expand and maintain coordination of services.

## **PROVIDING QUALITY FAMILY CENTERED SERVICES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN MEANS:**

- Helping families connect with natural sources of support through friends, neighbors, community members and others.
- Encouraging and assisting families in identifying their child's strengths and abilities.
- Providing routine-based, family, and relationship focused services.
- Providing services for infants and toddlers in settings that are engaging and responsive to child and family needs.
- Providing opportunities for positive interaction with children of all abilities.

## **IMPLEMENTING EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES IN NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS**

Beginning with each referral, listening to and learning from the family should be the main focus. The time and date of initial contact between the Family Resources Coordinator and the family should be mutually agreed upon taking into account the family's unique schedule. Families should be fully informed about the importance of receiving early intervention services in natural environments

The initial interview with the family is a time for discussing:

- The family and child's daily routines and activities and gathering other information to ensure full understanding of the family and child's needs;
- How early intervention can enhance the family's capacity to support their child's development;
- The role of parents and/or primary caregivers as integral partners throughout their child's development and the whole early intervention process;
- The intent of providing services in natural environments—emphasizing the importance of enhancing the capacity of the family to meet the special needs of their child with a disability;
- The family's concerns, questions, priorities, and resources, acknowledging the family's feelings and experiences;
- The supports a family may need or want to enhance their child's development.

## **INCORPORATING NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS INTO EVALUATION, ASSESSMENT AND THE INDIVIDUALIZED FAMILY SERVICE PLAN PROCESS**

- Parents are active Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) team members and fully included throughout the IFSP process. Their concerns, priorities, resources, family daily routines, and activities are reflected in the IFSP document.
- Evaluations to determine eligibility are recommended to occur in places where the child and family spend time and include the family's participation.
- The assessment should include observations of the child in a variety of settings so that learning opportunities within the family's daily routine can be identified.
- The ongoing assessment process should, to the extent a family desires, include opportunities to address family needs, concerns and priorities within the context of how their daily life is being affected by the special needs of their child.
- All early intervention services and support must be identified and recorded in the IFSP document.
- Child and family outcomes related to the child's developmental needs should be identified prior to determining how and where early intervention services and supports will be provided.
- Based on evaluation and assessment results, the IFSP team makes the decision about priorities and outcomes, and how and where early intervention services and supports will be provided. This includes determining the frequency, intensity, methods, settings and locations.
- Early intervention services and supports are implemented within the family and child's daily routines and activities.
- Families may refuse any or all early intervention services at any time. The IFSP should document family approval or refusal of services.
- Family training, counseling and support services may occur in a variety of environments and activities.
- Family support services are provided by various organizations within each community. They should be reviewed and be a part of each IFSP.
- The family and other IFSP team members may decide that a location other than a natural environment is needed to implement early intervention. When this occurs, a justification describing the reason why early intervention cannot be satisfactorily delivered in the natural environment must be documented in the IFSP.

## **EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES FUNDING**

- Washington State relies on a variety of public and private funding sources to implement early intervention services.
- All federal, state and local funds used to implement the Washington State early intervention system must comply with IDEA, Part C and Washington State's Application for Federal Funds. Therefore, Washington State must comply with the IDEA, Part C requirements to provide early intervention services in natural environments when using State funds that are budgeted for early intervention services and used to satisfy the non-supplanting requirement of the law.
- Families may also have personal/private resources that they may choose to use to obtain early intervention supports and services for their child.

## **WHAT IS THE COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN, DIVISION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD (DEC) POSITION ON INCLUSION?**

Inclusion, as a value, supports the right of all children, regardless of abilities, to participate actively in natural settings within their communities. Natural settings are those in which the child would spend time had he or she not had a disability. These settings include, but are not limited to home, preschool, nursery schools, Head Start programs, kindergartens, neighborhood school classrooms, child care, places of worship, recreational (such as community playgrounds and community events) and other settings that all children and families enjoy.

DEC supports and advocates that young children and their families have full and successful access to health, social, educational, and other support services that promote full participation in family and community life. DEC values the cultural, economic, and educational diversity of families and supports a family-guided process for identifying a program of service.

As young children participate in group settings (such as preschool, play groups, child care, kindergarten) their active participation should be guided by developmentally and individually appropriate curriculum. Access to and participation in the age appropriate general curriculum becomes central to the identification and provision of specialized support services.

To implement inclusive practices DEC supports: (a) the continued development, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of full inclusion supports, services, and systems that are of high quality for all children; (b) the development of preservice and inservice training programs that prepare families, service providers, and administrators to develop and work within inclusive settings; (c) collaboration among key stakeholders to implement flexible fiscal and administrative procedures in support of inclusion; (d) research that contributes to our knowledge of recommended practice; and (e) the restructuring and unification of social, educational, health, and intervention supports and services to make them more responsive to the needs of all children and families. Ultimately, the implementation of inclusive practice must lead to optimal developmental benefit for each individual child and family.

## **What Are Some Natural Environments Website Resources?**

The following list of resources are located on the Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program's Web site and can be easily accessed by clicking on the title Natural Environments Resources:

### **Keys to Inclusion**

<http://www.nectas.unc.edu/inclusion/default.asp>

### **Increasing Children's Learning Opportunities Early Childhood Research Institute**

<http://www.puckett.org/childlearn/products.html>

### **Early Childhood Instruction in the Natural Environment ERIC/OSEP Digest E591**

[http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed438671.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed438671.html)

### **Family-guided Approaches to Collaborative Early-Intervention Training and Services-Home Page**

<http://www.parsons.lsi.ukans.edu/facets/index.html>

### **Family-guided Approaches to Collaborative Early-Intervention Training and Services-Training Modules**

<http://www.parsons.lsi.ukans.edu/facets/html/famodules.html>

### **National Organizations' Position Statements on Inclusion**

<http://www.nectas.unc.edu/inclusion/natlorgs/posstate.asp>

### **Language Learning in Social and Cultural Contexts. ERIC Digest**

[http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed423531.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed423531.html)

### **DEC Books and Other Publications**

<http://www.dec-sped.org/books.html>

### ***Just Being Kids*, VHS Video, Early Childhood Media**

<http://www.media-products.com/ecm.htm>



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

A special thank you to the Natural Environments Ad Hoc Committee members who spent many hours working together to draft the Washington Guidelines for Implementing Early Intervention Services in Natural Environments. Their commitment and dedication to this project is commendable. Each member's expertise enabled the committee to complete the charge to develop guidelines, consider service delivery models and recommend a training and technical assistance plan.

The Natural Environments Ad Hoc Committee served as a committee of The Washington State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC) for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and Their Families. The Ad Hoc Committee was made up of families, service providers, early intervention contractors, state and local agencies, Family Resources Coordinators, therapists, educators, and representatives from higher education. To achieve balanced representation, Ad Hoc Committee members were selected with consideration given to geographic representation, ethnic and cultural diversity, family perspective, service provider types, and agency representatives.

The Committee began working on the Guidelines in September 1999. In March 2001, the draft Guidelines were distributed statewide to obtain public input. Input was received during the month of April 2001. The Committee reconvened in May 2001 to read and review all of the written comments submitted to the Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program. Based upon the public input, the draft Guidelines were condensed and revised. The Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program will ensure statewide distribution of the Guidelines upon approval by the Department of Social and Health Services.